

Art-matrix theory and cognitive distance: Farago, Preziosi, and Gell on art and enchantment*

Jakub Stejskal

I. Introduction

‘Every work of art that works is [...] a trap or a snare that impedes passage; and what is any art gallery but a place of capture, set with [...] “thought-traps”, which hold their victims for a time, in suspension?’¹ Theories of art that subscribe to the general sentiment expressed in this passage, namely, that art objects are agents enchanting their target audience, have tended to explain the operation of art objects as an agent–patient dynamic, a causal nexus of agency. They face a challenge, however, when they also aspire to embrace the idea – dominant in modernist and contemporary art theory – that the function of art is to unsettle its spectators’ habitual ways of perceiving and understanding, that is, to disenchant them: If artworks are to be understood as agents enchanting their recipients, how can they be forces of disenchantment at the same time?

The proclivity to treat artworks as agents indicates a shift in focus from semantics to pragmatics, that is, a shift from iconological and semiological investigation of what artworks express and symbolize to the study of their impact as social agents or their mediators.² One way of practising this sort of a pragmatic approach is to isolate a configuration of causal relations that tend to surround art objects in the eyes of their recipients.³ This methodological choice amounts to treating art neither as an aggregate of individual artworks nor as a set of specific techniques or functions, but as a matrix, a ‘topology of relations between differing

* I thank Tereza Hadravová, Derek Paton, and the referee for this journal, Jeremy Tanner, for their valuable comments and suggestions. Work on this essay has been supported by the Dahlem Research School, Freie Universität Berlin.

¹ Alfred Gell, ‘Vogel’s Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps’, in *The Art of Anthropology: Essays and Diagrams*, Oxford: Berg, 2006, 213. The essay was originally published in 1996.

² This has been a methodological trend of the last few decades within the history and theory of visual art. See, for example, David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989; Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994; W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

³ For other ways see the discussion in Keith Moxey, ‘Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn’, in *Visual Time: The Image in History*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013, 53–76.

ideas about the artist, the artwork, and their functions'.⁴ According to Claire Farago and Donald Preziosi (F&P), whose *Art Is Not What You Think It Is* constitutes a manifesto of this 'topological' approach, such a choice has radical consequences for art theory:

The model of the matrix [...] suggests a methodology and a strategy of fundamentally transforming the entire contemporary discourse on art and artistry. [...] It clarifies our function here to outline an alternative vision of a mode of practice that would be structurally, thematically, ethically, and politically different from what currently constitutes that discourse in academic fields such as anthropology, art history, and museology. (*AIN*, 79)

F&P develop their strategy in explicit opposition to the understanding of art objects principally as representations encoding non-artistic meanings, whether these are contents of the artist's mind, his or her emotions, or social values and relations. Rather than encode symbolic messages, the function of the art matrix is ultimately to enculturate people by setting up art objects as 'natural' indices of social agency, that is, as its causal, inevitable effects. For them the key question does not amount to what art objects express or represent, but under what circumstances and to what extent art objects become agents affecting their recipients. At the same time, F&P stress the potential of art to bring insight into what they perceive as a fundamental indeterminacy of the social configuration both of art and of society, which lies in the nature of art objects as both being artificial and manifesting their artifice. This potential, however, implies, a shift in perspective from treating art objects as indices of agency within a matrix to approaching them as possible means of gaining cognitive distance. This shift is presupposed but not addressed by F&P and it is not clear how it can be accounted for using an art-matrix theory. As all these points apply to an earlier, more developed attempt at a 'topological' and pragmatic theory of art, the art-nexus theory as presented by Alfred Gell in his *Art and Agency*,⁵ comparing the two theories sheds more light on the possible causes of the neglect.

It is therefore my aim in this essay to investigate this neglect, which is apparent when advocates of 'topological' art theories ascribe to art the ability to subvert its own enchanting effects and thus to initiate what F&P call 'interstitial space' and what I will refer to as 'cognitive distance'. I am aware that pairing these terms may seem problematic since both carry heavy conceptual baggage that makes them appear hardly compatible, let alone synonymous. 'Interstitial space' has a distinct post-structuralist and post-colonial pedigree,⁶ while 'cognitive distance'

⁴ Clair Farago and Donald Preziosi, *Art Is Not What You Think It Is*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, 13. Hereafter, *AIN*.

⁵ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1998, hereafter *AA*.

⁶ The *locus classicus* is Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, 2–4.

points to the humanist tradition of Erwin Panofsky.⁷ Cognitive distance implies an opposition between an enchanted, naive, 'inside' experience and a distanced, disenchanted, 'outside' perspective, whereas interstitial space behaves more like an 'interstitial passage', an oscillation between perspectives, which 'entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy'.⁸ But these obvious differences should not prevent us from seeing what the two notions have in common: they address the same aspect of experience with art – namely, the moment when art's own enchanting power becomes the topic of its experience, and they do it by postulating a spatial metaphor to indicate the required act of reflective recognition on the side of the recipient. An art-matrix theory that ascribes to art the power to disenchant had better explain how this happens.

First, I will reconstruct from statements scattered throughout *AIN* a conception of the art matrix as coherent as possible. Next, I will do the same with Gell's *AA* and his theory of the art nexus. Since there already exist several representative accounts of *AA*, I will confine myself to presenting only its basic outlines and spend more time on isolating the features it shares with the art-matrix theory. In the last part of the essay, I will discuss the possible causes of what I take to be the art-matrix theory's main weakness given its ambition: the failure to address the transition from participating in an art matrix to cognitively distancing oneself from it.

II. Art Matrix

F&P present their art-matrix perspective as an alternative to what they take to be the still dominant Western understanding of art as an expression or representation of its producer's – the artist's – individuality. This understanding turns out to be the result of just one kind of art matrix. The key elements of any art matrix are *work*, an *agent* or *agents* responsible for its material existence, and the *function(s)* or purpose(s) of the work. The matrix consists of relationships between these and other possible elements and has the nature of a structure to the effect that any change of value to any member of its topology will result in a dynamic reconfiguration of the matrix (*AIN*, 23, 82–83). Furthermore, an art matrix is not autonomous; rather, each of its elements may be connected to other social configurations (religious, legal, political), which may influence the topology of the art matrix by means of that particular element. This characteristic of the matrix F&P call its 'multidimensionality'. What is

⁷ That is how it is used, for example, in Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, 'Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism', *Art Bulletin*, 87:3, 2005, 409–12. For the concept of distance in Panofsky see Christopher S. Wood, 'Introduction', in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood, New York: Zone Books, 1991, 7–24; Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville, *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, 15–26.

⁸ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 4.

essential for the configuration of a matrix is the act of imputing causality to an *agent* that is thus held responsible for bringing the *work* into existence in order to make it socially *functional*. The imputing always depends not only on where the one who does the imputing is located, that is to say, whether he or she is within or outside the art matrix,⁹ but also on whether the point is to determine the immediate creator (artist, artisan) or the ultimate initiating agency that is responsible for the work and has guided or inspired the artist. Thus, for an anthropologist or an art historian the source of the agency may be in the singular or collective subjectivity that produced the artwork, yet for the artist or the intended recipients the agency responsible for the existence of the art object may, for example, be a supernatural force communicating through the skill of the artist (*AIN*, 23–24).

The imputed causal relationship extends to the imputing subjectivity so that the art object is perceived as an extension of the agent and as created to *affect* its recipients within the art matrix. The configuration of the art matrix determines which agency is imputed to the object by the recipients (*AIN*, 75). The art matrix participates in a production of meaning, which happens by ‘socializing people into ways of seeing things that create understandings about the world’ (*AIN*, 79). In other words, the role of the art matrix is to enculturate, to socially domesticate subjectivities. The matrix itself is the product of a broader social configuration which it at the same time consolidates as a force of enculturation or enchantment. The matrix determines what possibilities of action and use exist in relation to artefacts and what agency these artefacts can activate or indicate at a given moment in a given society.

The structural nature of the art matrix also means that it is potentially very unstable. Every recipient approaching an art object from outside the matrix immediately becomes part of a newly configured matrix because he or she imputes agency and purpose as well. And since he or she comes from a different context, the values of the matrix topology seem – and therefore are – different from his or her perspective. This means that everyone – and not just the artist or the art object as an extension of agency – interacting with the art object is an agent:

Configuring the study of artistry as a matrix or a network of distributed agencies necessarily places everyone within the matrix. Articulating the position from which the writing or observing takes place becomes an ethical responsibility when one considers that the art matrix connects everyone. For one’s personal agency is never personal. It depends upon where one is located in the network of agencies. The historically and ideologically charged terrain requires careful negotiation. (*AIN*, 80)

In consequence, we are dealing with a fragile constellation where delineating a

⁹ As we shall see, the outside-inside relationship can at best be understood only in relative terms.

matrix seems always to be just an approximative feat and differentiating between an outside and an inside observer will be only relative.

Claiming, as F&P do, that everyone interacting with an art object becomes part of its matrix raises the question about the identity of an art matrix. F&P do not state when it is still reasonable to talk about variations *within* one matrix and when a new matrix is established. They spend a great deal of time identifying the art matrix that has, in their view, dominated the discourse of the humanities dealing with visual art (museology, art criticism, art history, and 'aesthetic philosophy'). The core of this matrix is in the idea of *concordance* between cause and effect, that is, an accord between the creator or idea on one side and the work or the idea's embodiment on the other. Interpretation of an artwork thus becomes a decoding of the expressed, intended content, paradigmatically an expression of the unique individuality of the artist or of the spirit of the socio-historical setting. The 'truth' of an artwork derives from the relationship between the embodying form and the embodied content that precedes and exceeds the former (*AIN*, 8). According to F&P, this notion has its origin in mediaeval Christian theology, more specifically in the disputations about the agency of the sacred by means of relics and devotional images. Semiotically put, imputing an indexical relationship of the sacred affecting the material artefact legitimizes the iconic relationship between them. In early modernity, this discourse became integrated into the new way of understanding artistic intention and creativity, which has in turn become the core of modern aesthetics. According to F&P, 'from early to late to *postmodernity*, the structure of relations within the [Western] art matrix appears to maintain earlier religious notions under changing social circumstances as essential components in the modern discourse on the arts' (*AIN*, 42, F&P's italics).¹⁰

As F&P argue, this interconnecting of religion and art is not, however, specific to the Western art matrix. The social purposefulness of an art matrix (its enculturating force) hinges in general on postulating a 'natural' (as opposed to contingent, fabricated) concordance between agent(s), art object, and function of the art object (*AIN*, 8–9, 23). The (re)production of natural concordances by an art matrix is not, however, inevitable; rather, it is an ideal or ideological projection concealing the dynamic, never completely stable nature of the art matrix (*AIN*, 9–10). Art matrices may be more or less stable, more or less in control of their topological values, and immune to reconfiguration, depending on a broader social or

¹⁰ I will not develop further the authors' historical argument. Suffice it to say that readers of Preziosi will discover there a topic from his *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989. Bal and Bryson remarked back then that a refusal of such a concordance aesthetic, or, using Bal and Bryson's terms, refusal of a synecdochical approach to art as a representative of something that transcends it, had already been characteristic of many modernist approaches to art, so that calling, as Preziosi did, for the dissolution of what in essence is a theophanic concordance may 'fall rather flat'. See Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', *Art Bulletin*, 73:2, June 1991, 182.

ideological setting, but no matter how stable they may appear, the possibility of their becoming destabilized is intrinsic to their structural nature; they are fundamentally indeterminate.¹¹

Though not mentioned in F&P's book (but useful for my purposes as will, I hope, become evident), a paradigm case of a theoretical approach to art deeply entrenched in the Western art matrix is Panofsky's iconological interpretation of the meaning of an artwork, which combines aesthetic sensibility with scholarly erudition as a distancing corrective enabling scientific knowledge.¹² Its slogan is 'archaeological research is blind and empty without aesthetic re-creation, and aesthetic re-creation is irrational and often misguided without archaeological research'.¹³ According to F&P, every such 'expert' analysis relying on aesthetic intuition and corrected by scholarly expertise is based on a supposition of a natural concordance of non-artistic meaning and its artistic expression making 'aesthetic re-creation' possible (*AIN*, 85). Furthermore, an iconologist would thus force his or her way into the 'topology' of a given matrix and would infect it with suppositions about agency and function that are possibly alien to it, resulting in a redistribution of social agency within the matrix. This is perhaps unavoidable, but what makes Panofsky's iconology problematic is that such a redistribution would go unacknowledged by the iconologist. He or she would not see that any attempt at scientific distance amounts in effect to reconfiguration, an intervention in the art matrix. To claim insight into the meaning of the artwork in this way is to be in denial about the principal indeterminacy of the art matrix. Alas, this position, F&P argue, is typical of Western discourse on visual art history. The take-home lesson seems to be that it is imperative for any theoretical approach to art always to take into account that there is no such thing as a natural concordance between art makers, art objects, and recipients that could serve as the universal metaphysical backbone of the study of art. Every concordance is imputed and the one who does the imputing does so from a perspective that predetermines the configuration of the art matrix. There is no privileged approach to art's meaning and all that a purportedly 'distanced' act of interpretation can achieve is a reconfiguration of the 'topology' of the matrix, that is, the creation of just another matrix.

I have so far avoided asking the obvious question, namely, how F&P identify an art matrix among other social matrices. What is specific to art? According to F&P there is no such thing as an essential feature common to each and every work of art (*AIN*, 161). That does not prevent them, however, from claiming that art is bound to

¹¹ A Derridean argument *par excellence*. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge, 1978, 278–94.

¹² But see Preziosi's unfavourable comparison of Panofsky to Jan Mukařovský along these lines in *Rethinking Art History*, 111–21.

¹³ Erwin Panofsky, 'Introduction: The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline', in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955, 19.

something essential: religious and art phenomena are ‘complementary phenomena crafted in response to the most fundamental questions about the nature of signification and of being in the world; and about our relationship to things’ (*AIN*, 2). By narrowly tying together religion and art and connecting them to fundamental questions of being in the world, F&P are drawing on the broadly Heideggerian critique of modern aesthetics based on taste (*AIN*, 134–35).¹⁴ Briefly, this critique consists in reproaching modern subjectivist aesthetics for limiting its focus to the experiential and emotional side of one’s relation to art and neglecting the place of the unveiling of truth in and through art. It is in this spirit that F&P often make use of the terms *artifice* and *artistry*, referring to the etymology of art as an artisan’s skill, *ars* or *technē*. Artistry indicating technical skill and artifice as an ambivalent expression implying both dexterity and ruse denote features of art in its widest meaning (*AIN*, 1). Especially artifice as both skilful craft and cunning becomes central to F&P’s strategy (*AIN*, 144). As F&P put it, humans understand the world only by means of artifice, by producing meanings (*AIN*, 2). Social facts and relationships may come naturally to us, but they are the result of human artifice as well. Their configurations are centred on a transcendental source of authority (Natural, Divine Order), which secures their legitimacy and stability. The *artificial* nature of social relationships is their *artistic* nature (where art and artistry become one and the same thing). When human artifice becomes for whatever reason manifest, when it is to be paraded within a matrix, we have a tendency to speak of art.¹⁵ Art as *artifice* is essentially ambivalent: on one hand it serves as an enculturating agency, on the other it may, as a manifestation of technique and of the made character of the social fabric, draw attention to the facts that meaning is the product of human artifice and that the transcendental source of authority is void.

An artwork can thus draw attention to its artificiality as both a means of weaving the social tissue and a means of concealing this artificiality. And it is in this sense that F&P reinterpret Jakobson’s famous definition of poetic function as that which draws attention to the message itself.¹⁶ An artwork may then be understood as ‘anything having an aesthetic function at certain times and in certain places for certain individuals and groups for particular purposes’ (*AIN*, 159). Aesthetic function can make manifest the process of signification as something materially produced in a given social configuration (*ibid.*).

How does such a manifestation take place? Significantly, all the examples F&P offer are taken from contemporary gallery art. For example, they describe how

¹⁴ As channelled by Agamben’s first book (1970). See Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999; Martin Heidegger, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper, 1971, 15–87.

¹⁵ But, importantly, there is no categorical switch involved here.

¹⁶ Roman Jakobson, ‘Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics’, in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960, 356.

the piece *Quarters* by the Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum reaches the effect of uncovering what has been concealed in the cultural patterns of our perception. By means of the configuration of the space of the artwork, Hatoum places viewers in an interstice in which they oscillate between their own and an estranging perspective that unveils the artificiality of the former (*AIN*, 46–48). As F&P mention in relation to Olafur Eliasson, an artist functions as a ‘discourse enabler’, playing out a dialectic game between meaning anchored in the intentions of an apparently free subjectivity (the artist’s, the recipient’s) and its social conditioning (*AIN*, 159). In the emerging ‘interstitial space’ – a term borrowed from Homi Bhabha (*AIN*, 150, 160) – art no longer plays the part of an expression or representation of an identity or intention – singular or collective; instead, it is now a means of freely exploring various identities and intentions (*AIN*, 160). Aesthetic function, understood as drawing attention to artifice, here triggers its critical potential of cutting loose the transcendental anchor of techniques of social domestication.

F&P go on to say about Hatoum’s work: ‘what [she makes] very apparent is that both terms [that is, the viewer and what is seen] are not fixed or static but relational and dynamically changing phenomena – as indeed we have begun to explore here with the notion of the art matrix and its topologies’ (*AIN*, 48). Hatoum tries to achieve with her art what F&P try to achieve by means of theory. In both F&P’s theoretical work and Hatoum’s art the point is to construct a perspective from which a social matrix reveals its artificial contours by our achieving cognitive distance (*AIN*, 23). What the art and the theory do is (try to) make explicit, in F&P’s words, ‘what was hidden’.

III. Art Nexus

I will now proceed to present Gell’s conception of the art nexus from his *Art and Agency*. The similarities between *AIN* and *AA* are far greater than it may appear from the infrequency of references in *AIN*. To be sure, F&P do single out *AA* along with David Summers’s *Real Spaces* as two relatively recent ambitious, yet controversial attempts at outlining a more global, inter-cultural perspective on art (*AIN*, 100).¹⁷ In their assessment of *AA* they are in general agreement with those anthropologists of art and art historians who see in Gell’s book a largely stimulating, but problematic read.¹⁸ However, they fail to note the similarities between *AIN* and

¹⁷ See David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, New York: Phaidon, 2003.

¹⁸ This opinion comes in various shades, but appears in virtually all the serious discussions of *AA* I have come across. I include in this group Karel Arnaut, ‘A Pragmatic Impulse in the Anthropology of Art?: Gell and Semiotics’, *Journal des africanistes*, 71:2, 2001, 191–208; Robert Layton, ‘Art and Agency: A Reassessment’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 9:3, September 2003, 447–64; Matthew Rampley, ‘Art History and Cultural Difference: Alfred Gell’s Anthropology of Art’, *Art History*, 28:4, Autumn 2005, 524–51; Robin Osborne and

AA.¹⁹ I will not recapitulate the entire content of AA – since this has been done by others²⁰ – and will instead focus on the similarities between Gell's art-nexus theory and F&P's notion of the art matrix. Indeed, they are striking.

Gell's ambition was to chart out a theory of art that would focus not on the way art communicates meaning or conveys aesthetic value but rather on the way art objects have an effect on the reproduction of social relationships. According to this theory, art objects, by means of their formal or imaginative qualities, indicate to their recipients the agency (considered) responsible for their production. By captivating the recipients' minds as if by their own nature (and thus exhibiting agency), they naturalize the social power of the agents responsible for their existence as well.

Like F&P, Gell refuses to understand art objects solely in terms of their having an aesthetic function or expressing meaning. Aesthetic principles always serve other purposes of social interaction (AA, 4). From the standpoint of the anthropology of art as presented by Gell, these purposes are not to communicate meaning. Gell offers two independent reasons. First, visual art's function cannot rest in conveying information, since it lacks double articulation (AA, 165);²¹ second, the

Jeremy Tanner, 'Introduction: *Art and Agency* and Art History', in *Art's Agency and Art History*, ed. Osborne and Tanner, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007, 1–27; Whitney Davis, 'Abducting the Agency of Art', in Osborne and Tanner, *Art's Agency*, 199–219; Howard Morphy, 'Art as a Mode of Action: Some Problems with Gell's *Art and Agency*', *Journal of Material Culture*, 14:1, March 2009, 5–27; Brigitte Derlon and Monique Jeudy-Ballini, 'The Theory of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Theory: The Art of Alfred Gell', *Oceania*, 80:2, July 2010, 129–42. For an example of a rather uncharitable and impatient response to Gell's book, see Ross Bowden, 'A Critique of Alfred Gell on *Art and Agency*', *Oceania* 74:4, June 2004, 309–24. As far as I know, there exists no sustained assessment of AA by a philosopher of art to date, but see Jason Gaiger, 'Participatory Imagining and the Explanation of Living-Presence Response', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 51:4, October 2011, 363–81. For applications of Gell's theory to the anthropology of art and art history, see Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Thomas, eds., *Beyond Aesthetics: Art and the Technologies of Enchantment*, Oxford: Berg, 2001; Osborne and Tanner, *Art's Agency*; Liana Chua and Mark Elliott, eds., *Distributed Objects: Meaning and Mattering after Alfred Gell*, New York: Berghahn, 2013; Caroline van Eck, 'Living Statues: Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency*, Living Presence Response and the Sublime', *Art History*, 33:4, September 2010, 642–59; Sara Angel, 'The Mnemosyne Atlas and the Meaning of Panel 79 in Aby Warburg's Oeuvre as a Distributed Object', *Leonardo*, 44:3, June 2011, 266–67.

¹⁹ They briefly discuss Gell's book in the fifth chapter only to echo the criticisms of the anthropologist of art Howard Morphy (who in turn was a target of Gell's criticisms in AA).

²⁰ See note 18.

²¹ Double articulation describes an essential aspect of an efficient communicative code such as language, which, besides having articulate semantic units, also consists of sub-semantic articulate *figurae* that are the basic building blocks of the semantic units. This feature is what makes languages so economical, since a limited set of *figurae* may be used to create a vast number of semantic units. Any semiotic system that aspires to be an effective means of conveying meaning but lacks this kind of sub-semantic level of articulation will prove very

anthropology of art is a study of the social efficacy of art (AA, 3) which must therefore be understood as a 'system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it' (AA, 6). One may reasonably take issue with Gell that it follows from neither of the two reasons he gives that the anthropological study of the social context and efficacy of art rules out the study of its semantic dimension: a lack of double articulation does not mean that visual artefacts cannot convey symbolic meanings and affecting the world is not done in a semantic vacuum. A charitable reading of Gell, however, would show that he is not ruling out semantic concerns altogether, but sidelining them to make room for what he thinks should be the essential perspective of the anthropological study of art, namely, investigating art objects' role in the reproduction of social relationships.

Like F&P, Gell also explicitly excludes from his anthropological theory of art a universal definition of (visual) art because he does not believe there is an essential quality shared by each and every artwork. And like F&P, he proposes to understand artworks in terms of their place in a specific 'topology'. Positions reserved for art objects in that topology may in principle be occupied by any object or even any living being (AA, 7). An art object is anchored in a 'social-relational matrix', an 'art nexus' (ibid.). As part of such a nexus, the art object acquires the characteristic of an index. Inspired by Peirce's semiotics, Gell understands an index to be a 'natural' sign that is causally related to what it denotes: the interpreter of an index perceives it as a mark, a causal effect or source of agency. This process of inference is not of the nature of a syllogistic operation; it involves abduction. Unlike induction, that is, a deriving of a rule from repeated instances, or deduction, as a procedure of producing instances based on a rule, abduction is a hypothetical inference, a fallibilistic, rule-of-thumb act of judging that follows indirect and contextual clues: We read our interlocutor's mood in his or her facial expressions, yet he or she may be pretending; from the presence of smoke we infer the presence of fire, yet there may be smoke without a fire. According to Gell, abduction means that the referential ties have not been made fully conventional, where he takes convention to be identical with a rule that can be made discursively explicit. Such an understanding of conventionality allows him to claim that the abductive inference from an index is located half way between natural law and semiotic convention (AA, 14). Unfortunately, Gell never fully explains the functioning of this partly semiotic process of abduction and it represents one of the more problematic places of his theory.²²

Art objects belong to a class of indices of social agency. An example of such an index is the road sign 'no entry' understood by a driver as an extension of social agency: the driver is on the receiving end of a social power channelled by the road

impractical because it will have to deal with a huge set of signs.

²² See Arnaut, 'Pragmatic Impulse', 206–7; Layton, 'Art and Agency', 459–60; Rampley, 'Art History and Cultural Difference', 539.

sign. The sign is perceived as an extended arm of the law.²³ And something similar applies to the group of objects generally labelled as art: their recipients use abductive inference to understand them as results and means of agency (AA, 15). Gell understands agency as a force of change that has causal efficacy and may be imputed even to objects lacking consciousness. Art objects may be agents in the sense that they manifest the will of another agent; they are its extensions or 'secondary agents' (AA, 21).²⁴ Gell's characterizing the agency involved in art as social seems motivated by the need to set it off from the causality of natural laws (AA, 17). Yet he also wants to avoid becoming entangled in the intricacies of the philosophical debate on the difference between intentional action and causal happening,²⁵ so he uses the term agency not to imply the involvement of entities capable of intentional action, but solely to denote a relation of affecting agent (endowed with a mind or not) and receiving patient. An important feature of Gell's approach stands out here: his interest lies (at least in the parts explaining the art-nexus theory) in describing the abduction of agency as practised and perceived by those doing the abducting, not in explaining the social-historical genesis and nature of the process. That is why he feels free to speak without hesitation about the agency of non-living objects, provided that those participating in the art nexus ascribe it to them (AA, 21–22).

An art nexus consists of agent–patient relationships between index, artist, recipient, and prototype (AA, 28). An art object, as an *index*, may, by demonstrating its fabricated nature, refer to the source of agency that is responsible for its existence, that is, to the *artist(s)*. There must be a target of the agency mediated by the index, a *recipient* (AA, 24). Social agency may also be ascribed to what the art object stands for, that is, the *prototype* it represents (AA, 25), as when what is represented is perceived as affecting the way it is represented. An art nexus is a configuration of such agent–patient relationships. Imagine, for example, seventeenth-century guests in the house of a wealthy Dutch merchant marvelling at a skilfully executed portrait of him hanging in the drawing room. As *recipients* of the masterfully painted portrait (*index*), they acquire a patient position in relation to the painting. But the portrait will be effective only in so far as it is a secondary agent indicating the mastery of the painter (*artist*). The painter may be perceived by them as holding a passive position in relation to the person being portrayed (*prototype*), whose character the painter tries to capture or perhaps embellish (AA, 52). In such an art nexus, the prototype is identified by the recipients as the primary agent. It is

²³ The example is mine, not Gell's.

²⁴ For a criticism of the notion of secondary agent as denying true agency to art objects, see James Leach, 'Differentiation and Encompassment: A Critique of Alfred Gell's Theory of the Abduction of Creativity', in *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, ed. Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2007, 167–88.

²⁵ As it was carried out in the works of Elisabeth Anscombe and Donald Davidson and ensuing discussions.

important to stress that this identification by means of abduction comes to them naturally since the oil painting seems to them to radiate with the social status of the portrayed man. In other words, the art nexus tracks a series of imputed causal concordances between agent, index, prototype, and recipient. It seems that the ultimate patient will always be the recipient, but that does not have to be the case, as the following example from Gell shows: A teacher of art education asks each of her pupils to paint watercolours on the subject of his or her choice: the resulting works will index both the will of the teacher as the active recipient responsible for their existence and the patient position of the child artists, who are at the same time agents with respect to the subject (the prototype) they choose to paint (AA, 54).²⁶

As with *AIN*, one may inquire into what separates the art nexus from other configurations of agency. Though Gell dismisses essentialist accounts of art, he does allow for symptoms of arthood that are connected with abducting social agency. According to him, art objects are ‘characteristically “difficult”’, that is, they require technical skill and rich imagination on the part of the artist and a great deal of cultural literacy on the part of the recipient. But they often are difficult in yet another sense as well: they work as visual mind traps that hold our attention. Their technical sophistication and formal complexity draws our attention to their indexicality as something fabricated by someone with a certain intention (AA, 23). Their difficulty often serves to demonstrate their fabricated character as a puzzle, as a manifestation of a skill so refined that it must be guided by a superhuman agent (AA, 68).

The idea that mind entrapment is characteristic of art was already discussed by Gell in his earlier essay ‘The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology’, which in many ways anticipates *AA*.²⁷ Here, art is presented as a set of techniques serving to reproduce social order by using enchantment to make its members acquiesce. ‘Enchantment’ expresses the general premise that

human societies depend on the acquiescence of duly socialized individuals in the network of intentionalities whereby, although each individual pursues (what each individual takes to be) his or her own self-interest, they all contrive in the final analysis to serve necessities which cannot be comprehended at the level of the individual human being, but only at the level of collectivities and their dynamics.²⁸

Enchantment is a socially necessary means of domestication, the enculturation of individuals within a social web of relationships (‘the network of intentionalities in which they are enmeshed’). The production and reception of art objects serves social

²⁶ Gell devotes a lot of space to developing various art nexus scenarios in Chapter 4 of *AA*.

²⁷ Alfred Gell, ‘The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology’, in *Art of Anthropology*, 159–86. The essay was originally published in 1992.

²⁸ Gell, ‘Technology of Enchantment’, 163.

cohesion, this being an end beyond the intentions of an individual.²⁹ Bringing together conclusions from the enchantment essay and AA, we may summarize that art enchants by drawing attention by entrapping the mind, thus guiding abduction to the source and purpose of agency.³⁰

As we have seen, F&P believe that the enchanting, domesticating power of the art matrix may be subverted by the very artifice that sustains the matrix and they draw their examples from recent gallery art. In his enchantment essay, Gell also describes a particular occurrence in Western 'post-Duchampian' art, where art itself becomes the medium of subverting its power of enchantment because our attention is directed to 'the essential alchemy of art, which is to make what is not out of what is, and to make what is out of what is not'.³¹ He is referring here to the same phenomenon that F&P described as the ambivalence of artifice. It is as if the artwork enabled its viewers to step outside the art nexus, or perhaps as if the art nexus were configured so that those abducting the agency of the index would become aware of the artificial nature of the concordance involved in the abduction. In one of his last essays, 'Vogel's Net', Gell indeed hints at this new situation of art, claiming that 'art-making, art history and art criticism are a single enterprise nowadays' and urging the anthropology of art to join in.³² Picking up from Arthur Danto's philosophy of art, Gell understood what he labelled 'post-Duchampian' or 'concept' art as presenting objects or their sets in such a way as to invoke an intended interpretation. Artworks were to be understood as embodied meanings or, to use Gell's term, 'embodiments of complex intentionalities'. The role of the anthropology of art in art-making was in Gell's view to help integrate (or, to use Danto's term, 'enfranchise') artefacts from tribal cultures into the metropolitan art world precisely by revealing these complex intentionalities as embodied in those objects.³³

²⁹ Statements such as these – typical of functionalist explanations in the social sciences – beg the question of how it comes about that social groups (seem to) intend ends independent of their members' individual wills and desires. For an overview of the philosophical stakes of functionalism, see Alexander Rosenberg, *Philosophy of Social Science*, 3rd ed., Boulder, CO: Westview, 2008, 141–70.

³⁰ The relationship between enchantment and art's specificity has not escaped the attention of commentators. According to Rampley, enchantment has the central function of holding an art nexus together and is what makes it different from other nexuses ('Art History and Cultural Difference', 542, see also 532, 535). See also Davis, 'Abducting Agency', 211, 217; Layton, 'Art and Agency', 448, 450; Tanner and Osborne, 'Introduction', 2–3, 12.

³¹ Gell, 'Technology of Enchantment', 174.

³² Gell, 'Vogel's Net', 212.

³³ The possible points of contact between contemporary art and anthropology have since become a major field of interest for both artists and anthropologists. See, for example, Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, eds., *Contemporary Art and Anthropology*, Oxford: Berg, 2006, and Schneider and Wright, eds., *Between Art and Anthropology: Contemporary Ethnographic Practice*, Oxford: Berg, 2010. For an early reflection on the phenomenon from the perspective of art, see Joseph Kosuth, 'Artist as Anthropologist', in *Art after Philosophy and*

IV. Matrix and Cognitive Distance

The similarities between the art-nexus and the art-matrix theories are hard to miss. Both perceive art from the point of view of social agency and approach it by means of a meta-concept of matrix/nexus. At the core of it lies the work/index that exercises social efficacy over a patient by indicating a force responsible for its existence. It functions as an extension, a means; it is a secondary agent. Rather than encode symbolic messages or invoke aesthetic pleasure, the aim of art is ultimately (or from the perspective of social efficacy) to channel social agency by means of the work/index, often by manifesting the skill or imagination applied in its production. Aesthetic and symbolic means serve this end. For Gell as well as for F&P, the tendency to prioritize the semantic or aesthetic function at the expense of the pragmatic is a sign of what is basically a Eurocentric bias of the Western aesthetics of concordance. And lastly, even though Gell's and F&P's topological accounts of art stress its role in enculturation, they ascribe to contemporary art a critical potential (which it shares with theory) to subvert its enchanting power. This last similarity points to a shared neglect as well: while both the art-nexus and the art-matrix theories explain how art objects assume the role of indices of agency in a matrix/nexus, they do not provide the conceptual means necessary to understand how art objects can play a role in gaining cognitive distance. In the rest of this essay I will investigate this neglect.

In the chapters Gell devotes to presenting his art-nexus theory, the abduction of agency is always explained describing the inner perspective of the art-nexus participants. Art here is assumed to be the means of enchantment and, as such, is aimed at strengthening the social conventions surrounding the art objects. The situation changes once Gell turns to the topic of style in Chapter 8.³⁴ 'Artworks,' he claims, 'are manifestations of "culture" as a collective phenomenon, they are, like people, enculturated beings' (AA, 153). Artworks are individuated instances of stylistic principles dominant in a given aesthetic culture. Whereas the topic of indexicality and social agency was investigated with regard to the 'inner' perspective of those who imputed agency to art objects, manifestations of style are apparently approached from an outside perspective of someone who has gained enough distance to perceive an art object in the context of the whole cultural style: 'A "cultural" style-description would be an abstract account of the attributes of artworks in light of their capacity to thematize and make cognitively salient

After: Selected Writings 1966–1990, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991, 117–24, and Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer?', in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, ed. George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 302–9.

³⁴ This apparent inconsistency has not gone unnoticed. See Layton, 'Art and Agency', 458; Morphy, 'Art as a Mode of Action', 7; Arnaut, 'Pragmatic Impulse', 192; Davis, 'Abducting the Agency', 202, 207.

essential cultural parameters' (*AA*, 159).³⁵ This description is apparently open paradigmatically to the anthropologist of art rather than to those participating in the art nexus by abducting agencies.³⁶ Solely the analytic eye of the anthropologist may contemplate the social knowledge on offer by art objects. Unwittingly, Gell comes close here to Panofsky's iconology, which he formerly criticized for giving precedence to symbolic interpretations.³⁷ It is Panofsky who distinguishes between a 'naive' reception of art and a 'humanistic' interpretation by a scientist capable of gaining cognitive distance. Gell implicitly denies the art nexus participants the ability to gain cognitive distance from processes of agency abduction; this ability is reserved for anthropologists.

The conclusion that spectators of art objects participating in an art nexus are denied by Gell the agency required to gain cognitive distance may seem unconvincing in the light of Gell's extensive discussion in *AA* of the agency of recipients (chaps. 3 and 4). But whether recipients position themselves as agents or as patients with regard to the index, the prototype, or the artist, has no bearing on the fact that by abducting agency they already become integral parts of a causal art nexus limiting their autonomy. Howard Morphy's remark that Gell treats art objects as 'social parrots' that simply mediate agency the way smoke indicates fire or a smile indicates happiness applies to recipients as well:³⁸ their reaction to the index is understood in purely causal terms. This assessment of Gell is not entirely accurate, however. As we already know, Gell does allow – though not in *AA* – for circumstances under which recipients may become aware of the nature of agency abduction. He does so in his two pre-*AA* essays, 'The Technology of Enchantment' and 'Vogel's Net': Recipients of (post-)conceptual art are placed in a position similar to the one Gell reserves for the anthropologist of art in the second half of *AA*. The objects of their interest provide them with an insight into the 'intentional complexities' embodied in them. Gell thus at one time explicitly refuses to deal with art as the expression of meaning in the first half of *AA*, only to silently embrace this stance when he turns to style analysis in the second half and when he describes the role of art objects in contemporary art world in the two pre-*AA* essays.

Something similar happens in *AIN* as well, though it is less apparent. F&P in effect describe the art matrix as an enculturating schema of imputing agency and

³⁵ See Morphy, 'Art as a Mode of Action', 6–7; Davis, 'Abducting the Agency', 214–17.

³⁶ Recall Gell's description of enchantment by means of art as serving 'necessities which cannot be comprehended at the level of the individual human being, but only at the level of collectivities and their dynamics' ('Technology of Enchantment', 163). In the later essay, 'Vogel's Net', Gell criticizes Danto for ruling out the concurrence of functionality (of artefacts) and meaningfulness (as a feature of artworks), yet he does not deal with the question of how artefacts become meaningful in their original environment prior to their enfranchisement by the art world.

³⁷ Gell, 'Technology of Enchantment', 162.

³⁸ Morphy, 'Art as a Mode of Action', 8–9.

function to artefacts, yet from the nature of artistry as artifice they draw the conclusion that the art matrix may be subverted and art may manifest (that is, express in some sense) the artificiality and indeterminacy of the conventions organizing social relationships. Importantly, the perspective from which the ambiguity and instability of artifice is to be revealed is not described by F&P in terms of an art matrix, but rather using the image of an 'interstitial space', the functioning of which one learns precious little about; as with Gell, the shift to cognitive distance is not framed in terms of the 'topological' vocabulary.³⁹

That both Gell and F&P fail to address the logic behind the emergence of cognitive distance is no coincidence either. They maintain that the technical difficulty and imaginative suggestiveness typical of objects we have come to label as art are socially efficacious in ways that have little to do with autonomous experience. The art object is revealed to be a conductor of social energies, and is activated by its place at the centre of the art matrix/nexus, a social structure enabling the concordance of artist, index, and recipient. To understand the reception of a work of art in terms of an outcome of a causal nexus is to limit the autonomy of the recipient within such a nexus. To limit the autonomy is of itself hardly controversial; an advocate of a view that the reception of art ought to be free, or indeed can be free, from any outside determinants is a rare breed among contemporary philosophers of art or art historians (not to mention anthropologists). But placing the recipient at the receiving end of a causal nexus makes it tempting to liken the experience of art to spontaneous emotional reactions like responding with fear to danger, and thus to diminish the ability of a recipient to distance himself or herself from such a causal nexus, that is, short of its total reconfiguration. The recipient of agency is either reduced to a passive entity with severely limited autonomy (as is the case in *AA*), or a hyper-active entity that by its very reception re-configures the matrix/nexus (as in *AIN*). The causal pattern either prevails or is transformed into a new pattern, but in neither case is there room for cognitive distance. As a result, it becomes difficult to see how cognitive distance or interstitial space – of the kind Gell and F&P describe in examples taken from contemporary art – may be explained in terms of an intrinsically domesticating, enculturating art matrix. Gell seems simply to ignore the issue, whereas F&P stress that any imputing subject already is an agent, the consequence being not the subject's empowerment, but rather an art matrix so unstable that each non-conforming imputation of agency equals reconfiguration of the 'topology' of the matrix, that is, the creation of a new matrix. One is thus left wondering how to describe the appearance of F&P's 'interstitial spaces' in terms provided by the art-matrix theory short of embracing a negative theology of sorts that would make such an appearance a mystery. In other words, although championed by Gell as well as F&P, their own theoretical outlooks make it

³⁹ Admittedly, F&P would reject Gell's (unacknowledged) iconological position regarding the cultural analysis of style. According to them, there is no epistemic break between the 'naive' inside perspective and the 'scientific' outside view.

virtually impossible to make any sense of cognitive distance.

Assuming my argument for the inconsistency endangering the two 'topological' theories is convincing, what consequences should one draw from it? An obvious response would be to limit the reach of the art-matrix theory solely to non-metropolitan art worlds. After all, have I not noted myself that all the examples of cognitive distance (or interstitial spaces) provided by Gell and F&P come from contemporary contexts? This response would fall in line with the all-too-familiar position that contrasts the treatment of art objects as supernatural agents in pre-modern societies to the modern secular treatment of art objects as means of aesthetic communication. However, such a position would go against the basic motivation shared by Gell's and F&P's theories, that is, to convince us that the matrices of abduction on which art in tribal contexts tends to function are present in contemporary perceptions of art as well. At the same time they also want to claim for art the potential to initiate a critical stance towards its means of production and representation. It thus seems only reasonable to demand that art-matrix theories be able to address both the question of the abduction of agency and the question of the place of cognitive distance within an art matrix.

Can the two demands be reconciled? There surely is room for doubt,⁴⁰ but in conclusion I want to suggest briefly one possible way of attempting the reconciliation that I think merits further investigation. This attempt would amount to expressing in the vocabulary of an art-matrix theory what F&P call the inherent ambivalence of artifice and Gell labels the difficulty of art objects. Art objects are means of enculturation, exploiting and enforcing patterns of abduction, yet they generally are such by manifesting their made character, the skill and wit used in their production by an artist or artists. They become captivating precisely by resisting easy comprehension. In his commentary on AA Whitney Davis has suggested that the enchanting power of art may be derived from an inability to decode easily the source of agency, and has drawn from this the interesting consequence – that runs contrary to (yet is perhaps implicit in) Gell's official view – that the specificity of art may be related to this difficulty in inferring agency.⁴¹ To return to my earlier example, I propose to understand Davis's suggestion in the following way: the portrait of the Dutch merchant is effective as an index of social power not only because it partakes of concordances to which its recipients are sensitive, but also because it exploits a tension between them. The recipients are aware that they are looking at a work by a particular artist, yet they still see it as an emanation of the greatness of its commissioner. As the word 'emanation' indicates, the precise nature of the concordance between the agents responsible for the

⁴⁰ 'It is not clear, at least to me, exactly how to change the register of the conversation when talk goes from a picture's structure, or even its politics, to its agency, its voice, its life.' James Elkins, 'Introduction', in *What Is an Image?*, ed. James Elkins and Maja Naef, Stone Art History Institutes 2, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011, 9.

⁴¹ Davis, 'Abducting Agency', 211, 217.

painting's effect (in this case, the artist and the commissioner) remains enigmatic, difficult to comprehend, and that possibly increases the aura of the work in question. But such a situation can also serve as a fertile ground for a more distanced experience that brings the difficulty into view as one of the conditions of the art object's enchanting power; a cognitive distance is established that allows the recipient to reflect on the nature of the art matrix in which he or she participates. An art-matrix theory that would take as its axiom the premise that art objects enchant at least in part due to their making it difficult to abduct the agency responsible for their efficacious existence would then perhaps be better placed to account for instances of cognitive distance.

Jakub Stejskal is a POINT Fellow at the Dahlem Humanities Center, Free University Berlin, and Associate Editor of *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics*. He recently defended his PhD thesis 'Second Nature: A Contribution to the Social Philosophy of Art', submitted to the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague.

jakub.stejskal@fu-berlin.de



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).